

Jan Karski Award Presentation to KOR
Brief Remarks
Ambassador's Residence
July 4th 2014

Thank you, Mr. President, for your kind remarks and for honoring us with your presence at this celebration of American independence and friendship with Poland.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I now have the honor to present the United States Embassy's Jan Karski Freedom Award. This award recognizes Poles who have made outstanding political, social, and cultural contributions on behalf of democracy and human rights. This year, we celebrate the 25th anniversary of freedom in Poland, as well as honor the memory of Jan Karski on the Centennial year of his birth. I therefore am honored to present the Jan Karski Freedom Award to a group of Polish citizens that paved the road for a free Poland and a free Europe: the *Komitet Obrony Robotników* (KOR), known in English as the Workers' Defense Committee. Like Jan Karski, the members of KOR took personal risks operating underground in opposition to the authority of the state. Like Jan Karski, they focused the world's attention on victims of oppression. Like Jan Karski, they acted out of a deep concern for their fellow man, their love of Poland, and their dedication to freedom.

Today, we take it for granted that citizens have the right to organize civil society groups, even those that oppose government policies. But under communist domination, such activities were not just forbidden, but were dangerous. Despite that, KOR members and friends followed Jacek Kuron's sage advice: "Instead of burning committees [local party buildings], set up your own." KOR provided aid to political prisoners and their families, worked with foreign journalists to report on working conditions, and organized student discussions on democratic ideas. KOR and its supporters formed the first major anti-communist group in all of Eastern Europe and laid the groundwork for the birth of Solidarity. KOR's support of imprisoned striking workers forged the link between labor, dissident intellectuals, and society at large which was the foundation of Solidarity's later success. When strikes broke out in 1980, the inter-factory strike committee in Gdansk submitted a list of demands based on KOR's own Charter of Worker Rights. Solidarity was the successor to KOR, as KOR activists joined and supported the new union under Lech Walesa, and KOR subsequently disbanded, turning over the torch to the new movement that ultimately broke the back of communist power. The historic legislative election of June 4, 1989, the 25th anniversary of which we celebrated a month ago today, was the fruit of the seeds that KOR had planted already in 1976. The legacy of KOR, like that of

Jan Karski continued long after its work was finished, and remains an inspiration to us today.

We are proud to have many of the members of KOR with us here today. I ask our awardees to stand as I call out your names:

Konrad Bieliński, Seweryn Blumsztajn, Bogdan Borusewicz, Andrzej Celiński, Mirosław Chojecki, Wiesław Kęcik, Ewa Milewicz, Wojciech Onyszkiewicz, Józef Śreniowski, Maria Wosiek, Henryk Wujec.

I would also like to call out the names of KOR members who could not join us today: Stanisław Barańczak, Jan Lityński, Antoni Macierewicz, Adam Michnik, Emil Morgiewicz, Piotr Naimski.

Also, I would like to honor my friend, Zbigniew Romaszewski, who died a few months ago.

This award belongs to all members of KOR, and will have its permanent home at the European Solidarity Center in Gdansk. It will be available for viewing not only by KOR members but by all who want to learn more about Poland's historic struggle for freedom. My thanks to the Solidarity Center's director, Mr. Basil Kerski, who unfortunately was not able to be with us here today, for agreeing to display the award.

I would now like to invite to the stage the Speaker of the Senate, Mr. Bogdan Borusewicz, to say a few words. Speaker Borusewicz joined KOR soon after its founding, and over the past almost 40 years he built on that experience to play an important role in Poland's democratic transformation at every important stage, from the shipyard strikes in Gdańsk in 1980 through the historic elections whose 25th anniversary we celebrate this year, to his years of service in the Parliament and as Speaker - a living symbol of KOR's ultimate success in transforming Poland into a democracy. Mr. Speaker.

[Mr. Borusewicz's remarks]

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We once again thank the members of KOR for their heroism in the promotion of democracy and human rights that allow us to be here today. Thank you, to the members of KOR. Thank you, Poland -- thank you for your courage. As President Obama said during his visit to Warsaw last month: "Thank you, Poland, for your iron will and for showing that, yes, ordinary citizens can grab the reins of history, and that freedom will prevail -- because, in the end, tanks and troops are no match for the force of our ideals."